

The end of the European City?

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Since the end of the 19th century, social scientists, such as Georg Simmel and Max Weber in particular, have been engaged in developing theoretical concepts aimed at providing insight into the economic and socio-cultural significance of the (European) city. These concepts gained in prominence at the end of the 20th century, with the notion of the European city coming under pressure mainly due to the influence of the globalization of economic processes. The viability of the accepted model of the European city is now at stake.

A city is basically a geographical unit, not a ‘theoretical object’ of sociological analysis – that was the conclusion of a profound critical appraisal of sociological concepts for the study of urban phenomena.¹ In urban theory, there have been many attempts to create a theory of ‘the urban’ or of the urban structure. They all failed in the end because they ran into the dilemma of abstraction in order to find common characteristics of cities in general, necessarily regarding them as universal formations. The most prominent approach in this tradition was developed by the ‘Chicago School’, but other generalizing approaches have also been disseminated, mainly by American scholars. Today we face the situation that concepts applied to urban analysis are dominated by views from the United States – despite the obvious fact that spatial and social reality in European cities is extremely distant from what we can read in their literature. In this paper, I will first discuss some problems of abstract or universal approaches to urban development, subsequently outline the theoretical construct of the ‘European City’ and, finally, present some doubts on the use of this concept today.

Max Weber’s analysis of the ‘occidental city’, first published in the early 1920s² is usually regarded nowadays as too obsolete for contemporary urban studies because the autonomous medieval city no longer exists. Two analytical concepts have been critical of urban research in the 20th century, which refrained from taking geographical details into account: the socio-ecological approach (Chicago

School) and the Marxist approach. The most recent creation of a new ‘city type’, the Global City concept, has also been conceptualized as a universal category. However, new attempts are currently being undertaken to revitalize the notion with regard to the category of the ‘European City’ – and I shall refer to these toward the end of this paper.

The first sociological analysis of the ‘metropolis’ stems from Georg Simmel,³ who had been living in Berlin at the turn of the 19th/20th century. Robert Park, one of the founders of the Chicago School attended Simmel’s lectures in Berlin (see Lindner⁴; Louis Wirth has literally taken a great deal from Simmel for his famous article on ‘The ‘Urban Way of Life’ – without mentioning Simmel at all!). In a very brief sketch of the history of urban sociological theory (for an extended discussion, see Häussermann⁵), I shall try to delineate why the notion of the ‘European City’ is again a topic of discussion today.

Simmel

With his essay on ‘The Metropolis and Mental Life’,³ Georg Simmel became the first ‘urban sociologist’. He was interested in the culture of big cities and in the effects of space. To him, the big city represented the space of modernity – a notion that is understandable if you think of the sharp social and cultural differences between rural and urban areas in industrialized countries at that time.

Roughly summarized, Simmel developed two concepts:

- (a) He stated that social relations are special (functional, segmented) in big cities, that urban life enables individualization, and that living in big cities has effects on behaviour (keeping distance from other urban dwellers) and on attitudes (a certain coolness and arrogance). The city makes one rootless, but at the same time it is the space where one can be liberated from social control and traditional ties. The big city marked the transition from community to society.
- (b) The city is the space of the ‘money economy’ (‘Geldwirtschaft’), where social relations and exchanges become increasingly impersonal. The ongoing division of labour and competition in a limited space creates economic and cultural differentiation, specialization, and innovation.

Both concepts are bound to the heterogeneity of actors and to the spatial density of interactions – to be different is rewarded in an urban context, in contrast to rural areas where adaptation to homogeneous local communities is demanded. The *urban* is inextricably connected to the money economy, which means modernization; capitalism meant modernity. At the beginning of the 20th century, ‘modernity’ was limited to big cities.

Simmel promoted the notion that the three dimensions of the *urban* (heterogeneity, density and size) form a universal category for 'the City' – as Louis Wirth developed it later. In Simmel's view, there was nothing specifically European in the emergence of modern urbanism.

Chicago School

The Chicago School tied in with Simmel's basic ideas and generalized and reified them. The definition of the *urban* was verbalized as the simultaneity of heterogeneity, density and magnitude of a location, leaving aside the basic condition of the 'money economy'. The diluted definition given by Wirth was thought to be universal; all cities would show similar cultures, social relations, and spatial structures.

Adapting ecological theory, the Chicago School transformed Simmel's 'money economy' into a 'natural' phenomenon: competition and 'struggle' were seen as the basic dynamic forces of urban development. The urban dynamic was conceived as the struggle between groups, which formed the basic social units of the city. The segregation of groups – ethnic, national, racial, social – was conceived as the formation of 'natural areas'. So the city was seen as a 'mosaic of small worlds', as a balanced patchwork of communities in which the life of individuals was embedded. In this view, the urban communities cared about social control, individualization was seen as a danger, as a risk of disintegration and not as a form of emancipation as Simmel had seen it.

The approach of the Chicago School became the dominating paradigm for urban research in the 1940s and 1950s. With this paradigm, the idea of the convergence of spatial structures and socio-economic developments of all big cities also became popular. Because the ecological approach explained the urban structure primarily in terms of so-called 'natural forces', politics could be ignored completely. This provided a perfect foundation for the thesis of convergence between Eastern and Western cities, between the USA and Europe, between Old and New World cities. The socio-spatial structure of a city was theorized as the result of demographic and technological changes.

The theories of the Chicago School have been heavily criticized from a Marxist perspective.^{6,7} In the early 1970s, Brian Berry,⁸ a geographer, had already made an attempt to introduce cultural differences in the analysis of urban development, distinguishing between different paths of urbanization in different parts of the world. He was furiously attacked by David Harvey⁹ for this, because Harvey saw all cities bound into a world system in which each city in the Old or New World could be positioned.

Marxism

In the late 1960s, the Chicago approach was challenged by the revival of Marxist theories and analytical concepts. Simultaneously in Germany and Austria, in France and Italy, in the UK and the USA, Marxist concepts were revitalized in all social-science disciplines, and the ecological approach to urban studies was criticized as 'politically void' and non-historic. In the context of the political-economic approach, urban policies were analysed mainly on the basis of economic trends. The power structure was provided by the capitalist economic system. Thus, in 'New Urban Sociology' a universal model of urban development, this time based on economic analysis, had again been created, valid only for capitalist societies and in many cases not very distant from the ecological theory. Marxist theory is a way of analysing capitalist structures (societies). So it was clear from the beginning that socialist cities could not be analysed by means of this theoretical instrument and little attention was actually paid to cities in the so-called 'socialist' countries. Socialist cities did not play a role in the 'New Urban Sociology'. In a Marxist perspective, the city was regarded as the place of collective consumption and the struggle for good infrastructure was seen as part of the class struggle that had its centre in the sphere of production.

A more recent development of the historical-materialist approach was the *regulationist* school, in which politics and economy are bound together in the concept of Fordism, which means a historical compromise between capital, the state, and labour to promote a policy of growth. This theoretical concept allowed bringing in politics, and the analysis of changes at local level as actions of the local state. Political economic analysis provided the possibility to distinguish between developed and 'underdeveloped' countries and cities, and to give attention to political power in urban analysis.¹⁰

This theory was not conceived as being as universal as the ecological approach; to the capitalist world, it basically emanated from similar patterns of urban development or urban structures dependent on the stage of economic development. A certain economic determinism or functionalism could often be observed in the 'New Urban Sociology' literature.

The Global City

A prominent contemporary concept for urban studies is that of the 'Global City' based on the idea of a 'World City', as had been developed about 20 years ago by Friedman and Wolff.¹¹ The phrase 'Global City' – coined by Saskia Sassen¹² – became popular and is increasingly used as a concept to help us understand the urban changes relating to the globalization of culture and the economy. The basic message was that globalization of the economy creates a new type of city, the

Global City, which serves as a ground station for global economic actions, as a node in global networks, as a place for control of global flows. This is basically an economic-geographical categorization. Nevertheless, the 'Global City' does bind certain social consequences to this type of city: it should be marked by a concentration of high-level service functions, by spatial fragmentation, and by social polarization. Such cities are 'dual cities': split into a small world of globally related activities on the one hand, and a growing number of poorly paid labourers on the other, producing the amenities for the needs of the new service-sector elite.

There are serious critics of the proposition that the 'Global City' is a universal urban type, regardless of the national context. Critics maintain that there is no direct link between the Global and the Local, and that the social consequences, which Sassen stated to be typical of Global Cities, are either not seen everywhere nor are the consequences of processes that are not necessarily linked to this city type. Prétéceille and Hamnett¹³ have shown that the polarization of income does not take place in Paris and London – two of the so-called 'Global Cities'. Instead of a dualization, they find a growing differentiation of earnings: a strong growth of highly qualified professional service jobs with high earnings, and a minor growth of the income level in the more poorly paid jobs, but a growth nonetheless. All income groups in these two cities are moving upwards, so all employed people are earning more. The poor and the low-income groups seem to be better protected than the Global City thesis would suggest. The model for a Global City was New York and it may be the only true Global City in the sense of the concept.

Cities that function as nodes in global networks do not form one new type with respect to the social structure, rather they are also different, dependent on the national context, local traditions, and the position cities occupy as political units or as political subjects (c.f. Lehto¹⁴). It seems no coincidence that one will find these differences between New York, on the one hand, and Paris and London, on the other. This brings us to the idea of a specific European tradition, of the model of a 'European City'.

Max Weber and the European City

The idea of defining the European City in comparison to, for example, the Oriental City, was developed by Max Weber. He was not an urban theoretician, but he was interested in why European cities had become the birthplace of capitalism in medieval times, whereas no such development could be observed in cities in other continents. As the most relevant characteristics, those that make the difference, he listed the following:

- the market functions with an autonomous trade police,
- autonomous legislation and jurisdiction,

- the character of association inherent in the city: it was not just a place, it was a social unit,
- political autonomy, self-administration, and self-determination.

‘A special “status as citizen” (Bürgerstand) as ... a medium of status privileges was the characteristic of the city in the political sense’ (Max Weber). This was never the case in China, India, or Japan. The inhabitants of European cities, actually of Central European cities, established a formal community, a fraternity (‘schwurgemeinschaftliche Verbrüderung’) by swearing a *conjuratio*. The fraternity served for protection of property, and only landowners formed this fraternity. They represented the interests of the urban citizens (‘Stadtbürger’). Initially, they formed a temporary association, but later on this became a permanent organization. The enormous success of the urban economy was closely related to the self-government of the cities, and the citizens had to get involved in urban (local) affairs.

The city in Max Weber’s concept is not a physical structure, but rather a political association. He does not discuss the consequences of space, but the consequences of a distinct social and political institution, the core of which was the self-administering urban ‘Bürgertum’, the urban civil society. The city is conceived as a distinct society – in the same way as a state. This is the basis of the fact that, in Europe, one found a civilization with the sharpest distinction between the city and the countryside. Right down to the beginning of modernity, the border between the urban and rural world was marked by walls, and these walls formed the border between different societies. This was the case only in Europe.

It is because of these characteristics of cities, by means of which they clearly distinguished themselves from the surrounding feudal countryside, that economic and political dynamism could develop within the walls, becoming the foundation of occidental modernity. In the city, one was free from the peonage that denied most of the rural population and gained an existence as a responsible human being. Simply being part of the urban population meant extraordinary upward mobility on the social ladder in comparison to the rural population. The cities were the places of social and cultural innovation. This progress in civilization turned European cities into a symbol of modernization as long as they could act as autonomous corporate actors. With the incorporation of autonomous cities into territorial states, which took place under absolutism, they lost their special legal status and the residents of the cities became citizens of the states. But the cities continued to be the centres of cultural and economic innovation.

The end of the cities as autonomous units heralded the declining significance of Max Weber’s analysis. From that time onward, the cities were interwoven with the national economy and national society and no longer formed a special society and so the model of the European city lost relevance. However, there are obvious

indicators of major differences between European cities and large cities elsewhere, the physical structure is distinctive, as is their political system and social coherence. Is a model of 'the European City' still alive after all?

The European City today

The social organization of the European City

Today the citizen ('Stadtbürger') is a mythical subject in the debate about the urban future, because he played a crucial role in the development of the European urban culture. His economic and political energies are still seen as the most important ingredients of the social capital of the cities even today. The historical role of the 'Stadtbürger' is regarded as follows: the owners of the buildings in a city were identical with the users, at street level there were shops, and offices and the living quarters were on the upper floors and this formed a social and economic unit on a small parcel of land. Economic success and social integration were closely related to the parcel of land in the city. But industrialization triggered a fundamental change of the social structure and the social organization of the city. With industrialization, a 'large-scale equalizer' seemed to have taken over the cities and this was the end of the bourgeois city. But the profile of the European city can still be recognized when it is compared with the USA, where the forming and the growth of cities did not start until industrialization.

The social organization of the American City

The American city is the hub of radical modernity, its spatial and social development being subject to the dictate of the market. The use of land follows exclusively the demand of private investors, and the value of a place is determined only by the market. Scarcely-regulated development leads to a sharp segregation of the different population groups in accordance with income, status, and ethnicity. The performance of neighbourhoods is predominantly dependent on economic cycles. Local traditions, social concerns, or respect for an urban culture do not play a significant role. The city centre is not a place with which one can identify oneself, but is a 'central business district' (CBD) in which culture and housing do not play a significant role. In the American city, tenement houses are usually owned by landlords living outside the city, who are not interested in 'the city as a social affair'. They are primarily, if not solely, interested in the gains they can make from the properties. The problem of 'absentee ownership', as a cause for the decline of inner-city neighbourhoods, is well known.

The heritage of the European City in the 19th and 20th centuries

In Europe, as early as the second half of the 19th century, a broad opposition was formed, supported by the enlightened bourgeoisie, against the market-led urban development that was regarded as responsible for the deep social contrasts and for the inhuman living conditions of the lower classes in the cities. Friedrich Engels' report on Manchester can be seen as a part of bourgeois concern about the anti-social effects of the urban environment. Whereas liberal principles were introduced in the formation of the urban environment and in the provision of housing by means of a process of bourgeois revolution, and whereas the local parliaments were dominated by an institutionalized majority of landlords, an urban regime was established in European cities based on a structure in which private economic interests were forced to seek compromises with social responsibilities and the interests of the city as a whole (they set good examples in health politics, in the slow improvement of housing, and in anti-poverty initiatives, at least in caring for the poor). This can be seen as the creation of an urban regime that felt responsible for 'the' city in all European countries.

This model of a 'moderate modernity'¹⁵ was thus created, based on the strong influence of public administration on urban development, which can be characterized by the following:

- Public ownership of land was increased, which enabled the cities to play an important role in decisions on the user-structure of the urban area, giving them the opportunity to plan the urban structure in a long-term perspective.
- After initially negative experiences with private owners, the infrastructure for the provision of water and energy, as well as the transport system, was organized as a public affair. This 'municipal socialism' was effective and brought gains for the public budget and it provided an often-perfect infrastructure for the big cities.
- Parallel to this growing influence of economic activities upon urban development, the legal instruments for planning the physical structure were also created. In the last few decades of the 19th century, local governments acquired growing influence over the spatial pattern of the cities. The laws for the control of land use and development schemes were developed at a local level, and the regulation of construction and specific use became stronger when the states took over and unified the legal regulations for urban development in the 20th century.
- In most European states, a more or less robust welfare state was developed, able to tackle the poverty of the masses in the cities, and a growing number of inhabitants were prevented from becoming homeless due to economic hardship. In all states in which industrializa-

tion had taken place, and in which the proletarian masses were attracted by the rapidly growing cities, different approaches to forms of 'social housing' were developed, i.e. they started with the creation of a housing sector in which the quality of housing was not directly dependent on the economic power of the tenants. Steps toward a decommodification of housing were taken in the industrializing European states and cities, but not in the USA.¹⁶ In this way, the slums and ghettos that are so typical of American cities could be avoided in European cities. Their first manifestations, described by Friedrich Engels, could be demolished in the course of the 20th century, and the creation of more and new ones was hindered by the growing effectiveness of national and local social policies from the late 19th century onward. Another beneficent element was the state-financed urban renewal programmes, which brought about the physical renovation of the high-density inner-city neighbourhoods, which had insufficient physical quality, accommodating a poor population. Despite the social consequences of the urban renewal programmes (the relocation of the working class), it was never in doubt that 'the city' as a whole should feel responsible for the living conditions in the inner city areas, and that these quarters should not be destined for a purely capitalist restructuring.

As a consequence of these historical developments, even today the core of the model of a European city is the public influence on urban development, and the perception of the city as a collective identity. This becomes very clear, if you compare, for example, the structure and the development of marginalized neighbourhoods in American and European cities (see Wacquant¹⁷). This means that there are remarkable differences in the overall composition of the cities (Ref. 18, pp. 224–239) and in the degree of social integration. The welfare-state systems,¹⁹ as well as the urban policies embedded in them, mark a sharp difference between cities that are only a setting for market exchanges and those that have more command of their social and spatial development.¹⁴

Americanization and Alternatives

Whereas the social organization of the European city does not play a significant role in contemporary debates on urban development in Europe, the image and the physical structure of the European city are currently undergoing a renaissance.²⁰ With the decline of social housing in most European states, allied to the financial squeeze on municipalities, the influence of public decisions on the socio-spatial organization of the cities has been diminishing dramatically. The privatization of housing, the selling of public land, the selling of public enterprises, the

commodification of public and social services are policies to be seen everywhere. There is a tendency toward the dissolution of the city as a public good.

The 'Americanization' of the European city seems to be under way, and this would mean a movement toward the market-driven organization of the cities. Perversely, 'New Urbanism' – a nostalgic, European urban form simulating urban design – simultaneously propagates the image of the European city as a post-modern orientation, although without any cultural or social analogy to the traditional European city. This 'rediscovery' of the European City is just a fake.²⁰

But we also find the proclamation of a new future for the model of the 'European City' by urban sociologists, who appeal to Max Weber as well as to the special traditions of European cities and to the historic and geographical peculiarities of the European urban system. Arnaldo Bagnasco and Patrick Le Galès²¹ argue bravely for a new notion of the European city and for new analytical perspectives contrasting with American urban sociology. Their basic argument is that the declining significance of nation-states (as a consequence of globalization and Europeanization) helps generate a 'power vacuum', which could give new opportunities for local or regional action. To them, this is not merely a thesis and not a question: their 'analytical standpoint' is that 'cities have become political and economic actors in Europe'.²¹ 'Cities are clearly again becoming actors, ... they create their own identities. ... Cities remain significant tiers of social and political organization. ... Cities ... constitute separate units as actors'. They declare a 'new climate of doubt and uncertainty for the higher authorities: (this constitutes) a new historical interlude ... (and) the room for manoeuvre is growing for cities'. Moreover: 'the classical model of the medieval European city remains alive and well'. 'It is not the Max-Weber-integrated medieval city, but it counts for something ... the city has meaning'. They are in favour of a renaissance of Regionalism, which means 'the resistance of traditional societies to market penetration'. The argument has been elaborated further in Le Galès' recent book.²²

The basic argument in favour of this new notion is that (a) the European urban system is different from the American (more medium-sized cities, fewer metropolises), (b) the appreciation of an urban culture never ends, and (c) cities remain strongly regulated.

We can basically agree to that, but one question remains open: what is the basis of a local identity or the formation of the city as a social, respectively political, subject? Part of the answer should concern the way in which the impact of globalization upon the urban fabric is perceived. Does it split the cities, or separate globally linked parts of the city from local networks, which become increasingly dependent and marginalized? Or is there a close relation between global and local networks, which is necessary for global action, as global actors must be embedded in local networks (and cultures)? If the latter is true, the question still remains as to whether or not this can be a basis for the formation of a political subject in a

sense that includes redistributive capacity. While the conditions for local action are increasingly converging due to the internationalization of economic relations and the enormous power that international players have achieved over the last two decades, we can observe remarkable differences in local responses to these tendencies.

Historical differences, coherent development strategies, the public provision of the infrastructure, and the ongoing identity of cities, make European cities distinct from urban reality in the United States. Form, culture, policies, and the living conditions of European cities legitimize the demand for a new orientation in urban theory that is able to take into account these differences.

Conclusion

The European city was a creation of landowners who simultaneously formed the economic and cultural forces of urban development. They conceived themselves as a distinct class, and this social class acted on the basis of political autonomy. This class dominated the cities, and it was a revolutionary force in defending their autonomy. This was the contribution of the European city to the development of modern civilisation.

Along with the process of democratization that occurred in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the dominating role has been assumed by the state through the elected local administrators. They represented, to a certain degree, what is called 'Gemeinwohl' in German – a 'common interest' – not only the specific interests of one particular class, but the common interest of an imagined modern city.

The professionalization of urban planning and the concept of 'the modern city' often led to the destruction of the historical legacy of European cities in the 20th century. The opposition to this destruction initially came from the residual tradition of the bourgeoisie – currently represented by the diminishing bourgeois classes and the new middle-classes, which have developed a new taste for urban life.

Today, the opposition to the market-driven model seems to be weaker than at any previous time. Political support for collective institutions is undermined by individualization and by neo-liberal hegemony. The idea of the regeneration or revitalization of the European city is based upon the notion of a lively regional or local identity that devotes energy to the struggle against the regimental forces of globalization. The fact that this idea is not helplessly idealistic or naive can only be justified by the reality of the traditional interventionist role of local authorities in urban history. Can this be revitalized? This hope is the legacy of the European city.

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